

HOLIDAYS AND FESTIVALS

Hanukkah and Chag HaBanot

Eight nights of light, honey soaked fritters, Ladino songs, and a North African festival that honors women and girls.

WHEN

Eight nights beginning on the 25th of the Hebrew month of Kislev, usually in December.

THE STORY

The Maccabees rededicated the Temple in Jerusalem in 164 BCE after the Seleucid king Antiochus IV had dedicated it to Zeus.

CHAG HABANOT

The “Festival of the Daughters,” on the new moon of Tevet, the sixth or seventh day of Hanukkah.

LADINO DAY

First proclaimed for the last day of Hanukkah in 2013, to celebrate the Judeo Spanish language of Sephardic Jews.

Hanukkah lights burned in Jewish homes from Casablanca to Baghdad to Sana'a, each community adding its own touches. Families hung their lamps by the doorway, fried sfenj and zalabia, sang Ladino songs, and told the story of Judith, a heroine whose courage became part of the holiday. In Tunisia and other communities, the new moon that falls during Hanukkah became a festival of its own, a day for women and girls.

Chag HaBanot: the Festival of the Daughters

Known in Judeo Arabic as *Eid al Banat*, Chag HaBanot falls on Rosh Chodesh Tevet, the start of the Hebrew month of Tevet. It was best preserved in Tunisia, especially on the island of Djerba, and was also kept in Libya, Algeria, and Morocco, and in Istanbul and Thessaloniki. Some sources name still other communities. Customs varied from place to place:

- **A day of rest for women.** Women set aside their work, visited one another, cooked, sang, and danced.
- **At the synagogue.** In some communities women came to kiss or touch the Torah scrolls and recite blessings.
- **Gifts and sweets.** Mothers gave gifts to daughters and grooms to their brides. Tables held doughnuts, honey cookies, and in Tunisia a sweet called *bjawia*.
- **Honoring girls.** Girls nearing bat mitzvah age and engaged young women were especially celebrated.
- **Making peace.** Women who had quarreled were expected to reconcile.

Loss and revival. After most Jews left North Africa in the mid twentieth century, Chag HaBanot largely faded. Today it is being rediscovered. In Jerusalem, a group of women of Middle Eastern and North African heritage called Arevot has held a celebration, and some communities in the United States have added the festival to their Hanukkah, lighting candles in honor of a meaningful woman. In 2020, JIMENA and the Mizrahi Dance Archive hosted a celebration with a concert from Morocco by singer Lala Tamar and Moroccan women musicians.

Who was Judith?

The Book of Judith, part of the Apocrypha rather than the Hebrew Bible, tells of a wise and brave widow who saved her town from the general Holofernes. Later retellings add that she fed him salty cheese and wine before defeating him. Sephardic Jews preserved a Hebrew retelling, *Ma'ase ha-Yehudit*, and some families read it at Hanukkah. Eating cheese and dairy foods during the holiday recalls her story.

Another tale honors a daughter of Yohanan the High Priest, whose bold protest is said to have helped spark the revolt.

Lamps, light, and song

The Hanukkah lamp, or *hanukkiyah*, took beautiful local forms. Museum collections show how Jewish artisans shared the artistic language of their Muslim neighbors.

- **Hanging lamps.** In Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia many families hung the lamp in the doorway beside the *mezuzah*. Some Tunisian families left it there until Purim.
- **Morocco.** A cast and enameled lamp from the Anti Atlas region, in the Jewish Museum in New York, has a horseshoe arch and birds. A silver lamp there, probably from Essaouira, shows a fish and a bird and may have been a wedding gift.
- **Baghdad.** A lamp in the same museum combines *hamsa* hands, roosters, and a star and crescent, motifs common across the region.
- **Yemen.** Yemenite lamps were often carved from stone, with boat shaped oil wells. A Yemenite style stone lamp in the Jewish Museum was made in Jerusalem around 1880 to 1930.

“Ocho Kandelikas” and Ladino Day

“Ocho Kandelikas” (“Eight Little Candles”) is often thought to be an old folk song, but Flory Jagoda wrote it in 1983. Born in Sarajevo in 1923, she later brought her family's Ladino songs to the United States and dedicated her holiday songs to relatives lost in the Holocaust. She received a National Heritage Fellowship in 2002.

Israel's National Authority for Ladino proclaimed the first International Ladino Day for December 5, 2013, the last day of Hanukkah that year. Communities now choose their own dates, and some celebrations include Ladino Hanukkah songs.

Community by community

Morocco

Families fry *sfenj*, spongy rings of dough dipped in honey or sugar, and *zangula*, batter fried in a thin spiral. In some communities, leftover wicks were gathered on a ninth day for a bonfire.

Sources: Tablet; My Jewish Learning; Reform Judaism

Tunisia

The heartland of Chag HaBanut, especially in Djerba and Tunis. On the seventh day of Hanukkah women did no work, visited one another, and shared doughnuts and honey cookies.

Sources: Hebcal; Jewish Theological Seminary; Reform Judaism

Libya

Families sent *spanj*, Libyan doughnuts, to married daughters, synagogue elders, and schoolchildren.

Source: My Jewish Learning (Adam Eilath)

Iraq

Iraqi families make *zalabia*, a yeasted batter fried like a funnel cake and soaked in a very sweet syrup.

Source: My Jewish Learning (Joanna Nissim)

Syria (Aleppo)

Aleppo families light an extra *shamash*, or helper candle, each night, a custom with several traditional explanations. Cheese filled *atayef* pancakes recall Judith.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Reform Judaism; Unpacked

Yemen

After the lights were kindled, women went into the street and made music with bells. Families also fry zalabia.

Sources: My Jewish Learning; Unpacked

Ottoman Sephardic (Turkey, Greece, the Balkans)

Families fry *bimuelos* (also *burmuelos*) with honey or sugar, eat dairy foods, and sing Ladino songs. Ladino books such as *Me'am Lo'ez* retold the story of Judith for home reading.

Source: University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies

Kurdistan

Some families made Hanukkah lamps from eggshells filled with oil. In a playful custom, children locked the doors and were given coins to let adults in.

Source: Reform Judaism (Cantor Lauren Phillips)

Common misconceptions

- **"Latkes and sufganiyot are the Hanukkah foods."** Every community has its own fried treats, from sfenj to bimuelos to zalabia.
- **"Ocho Kandelikas is a medieval Sephardic song."** Flory Jagoda composed it in 1983.
- **"Judith is in the Hebrew Bible."** Her book is in the Apocrypha. Its link to Hanukkah grew later through retellings.
- **"Chag HaBanot is a modern invention."** It is a traditional festival, mainly of North Africa, recorded in some communities centuries ago, that is now being revived.

Words to know

Hanukkiyah *Hebrew*

The nine branched Hanukkah lamp.

Shamash *Hebrew*

The "helper" light used to kindle the others.

Rosh Chodesh *Hebrew*

The new moon, the start of a Hebrew month.

Chag HaBanot *Hebrew*

"Festival of the Daughters," on Rosh Chodesh Tevet.

Eid al Banat *Judeo Arabic*

The same festival's name in North Africa.

Ma'ase ha-Yehudit *Hebrew*

"The Story of Judith," a retelling read at Hanukkah.

Sfenj, spanj *Moroccan and Libyan Judeo Arabic*

Spongy fried dough rings.

Bimuelos *Ladino*

Fried fritters with honey or sugar.

Zalabia *Iraqi Judeo Arabic*

Fried batter soaked in syrup.

Ladino *Judeo Spanish*

The language of Sephardic Jews of the Ottoman world.

Bringing Hanukkah to life

In the public school classroom

- Compare Hanukkah lamps from Morocco, Baghdad, and Yemen in museum collections, and discuss the designs Jews shared with Muslim neighbors.
- Listen to "Ocho Kandelikas" and read *The Key from Spain*; trace Flory Jagoda's journey on a map.
- Explore Chag HaBanot as a case study in how communities honor women and how traditions are revived.
- Do not have students light candles, recite blessings, or reenact rituals. Present Judith's story in an age appropriate way, and follow allergy rules when sharing foods.

In Jewish schools and communities

- Host a Chag HaBanot gathering on Rosh Chodesh Tevet, honoring mothers, grandmothers, teachers, and bat mitzvah girls.
- Fry sfenj, bimuelos, or zalabia together, and serve a dairy dish in honor of Judith.
- Read *Ma'ase ha-Yehudit* or the Book of Judith with older students.
- Sing Ladino songs or plan an event for Ladino Day.

At home and with family

- Ask relatives: Where did our family hang the hanukkiyah? What did we fry? What songs did we sing?
- Light an extra candle in honor of a woman who shaped your family.
- Read *Hanukkah Around the World* with children.
- Record an elder's Hanukkah memories for JIMENA's oral history project.

Questions for discussion

- Why might a community create a festival just for women and girls? What does Chag HaBanot teach about honoring people whose stories are often left out?
- How do Hanukkah lamps and foods show the culture Jews shared with their neighbors?
- Why do you think people revive traditions that nearly disappeared? Is there a tradition you would bring back?

Learn more

Watch and listen

Chag ha'Banot: An Interfaith North African Hanukkah Celebration of Women (JIMENA, 2020)

youtube.com/watch?v=YL4DzpiSgPI

Homegrown Plus: Flory Jagoda (Library of Congress concert videos and interview)

blogs.loc.gov/folklife/2019/03/homegrown-plus-flory-jagoda

Remembering Flory Jagoda (NPR audio)

npr.org/2021/02/12/966942550/remembering-flory-jagoda-who-preserved-sephardic-jewish-music-and-language

Flory Jagoda and "Ocho Kandelikas" (Vox Tablet podcast)

tabletmag.com/podcasts/153718/flory-jagoda-ocho-kandelikas

Read

The Key from Spain: Flory Jagoda and Her Music, by Debbie Levy, illustrated by Sonja Wimmer (Kar-Ben, 2019). Picture book.

lernerbooks.com/shop/show/17905

Hanukkah Around the World, by Tami Lehman-Wilzig, illustrated by Vicki Wehrman (Kar-Ben, 2009).

kirkusreviews.com/book-reviews/tami-lehman-wilzig/hanukkah-around-the-world

Encyclopedia of Jewish Food, by Gil Marks (Houghton Mifflin

Harcourt, 2010). For teachers and cooks.

asif.org/en/library/encyclopedia-of-jewish-food

From JIMENA

Chag HaBanot and Mizrahi Feminism (PDF)

jimena.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Chag-Habanot-and-Mizrahi-Feminism.pdf

Culture and Holidays video collection

jimena.org/videos/culture-and-holidays

Sephardi & Mizrahi Education Toolkit (designed mainly for Jewish day schools)

sepharditoolkit.org

Share your family's story

jimena.org/share-your-story

Explore online

Chag HaBanot (Hebcal)

hebcal.com/holidays/chag-habanot

A New Tradition for Hanukkah 5785 (Jewish Theological Seminary)

jtsa.edu/chag-habanot-north-african-hanukkah-festival

Chag Habanot (Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue)

rossingcenter.org/?p=1795

You Need to Know About North Africa's Feminist Hanukkah Tradition (Hey Alma)

heyalma.com/you-need-to-know-about-north-africas-feminist-hanukkah-tradition

8 Hanukkah Traditions From Around the World (My Jewish Learning)

myjewishlearning.com/article/8-hanukkah-traditions-from-around-the-world

Sephardic Hanukkah Traditions (My Jewish Learning)

myjewishlearning.com/2014/12/16/sephardic-hanukkah-traditions

New Light Shed on Sephardic Sources for Hanukkah Heroes

(University of Washington)

jewishstudies.washington.edu/digital-sephardic-treasures/sephardic-sources-for-hanukkah-heroes

Manna from Heaven: Bumuelos, a Sephardic Hanukkah Treat (University of Washington)

jewishstudies.washington.edu/sephardic-studies/manna-from-heaven-bumuelos

Hanukkah Lamp, Morocco (Anti Atlas) (The Jewish Museum, New York)

collections.thejewishmuseum.org/collection/7607-hanukkah-lamp

Six Traditional Hanukkah Dishes That Aren't Latkes or Sufganiyot (Unpacked)

unpacked.media/dont-knock-it-till-you-fry-it-six-traditional-hanukkah-dishes-that-arent-latkes-or-sufganiyot

International Ladino Day (University of Washington)

jewishstudies.washington.edu/sephardic-studies/international-ladino-day



About JIMENA

JIMENA, Jews Indigenous to the Middle East and North Africa, preserves and shares the history, heritage, and living culture of Sephardic and Mizrahi Jews. Explore more explainers, oral histories, videos, and teaching resources at jimena.org/cultural-heritage.

A note for educators

This explainer is written to support teaching *about* religion and culture. In public schools, present customs, texts, and prayers as subjects of study, and do not ask students to perform rituals, recite blessings, or take part in religious practice. Share your family's story with JIMENA at jimena.org/share-your-story.

Sources consulted include Encyclopaedia Britannica; Hebcal; the Jewish Theological Seminary; the Rossing Center for Education and Dialogue; My Jewish Learning; Hey Alma; Kveller; JewishArts.org; The Media Line; Reform Judaism; JOFA; Tablet; Unpacked; the University of Washington Stroum Center for Jewish Studies; The Jewish Museum, New York; JTA; NPR; the National Endowment for the Arts; and the Library of Congress. Links checked October 2026; jimena.org links point to JIMENA's new website. © 2026 JIMENA. May be freely shared and printed for educational use.